SERVING TWO MASTERS: ROLE EXPECTATION ENACTMENT AND ANTICIPATED CAREERS OF SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

ABSTRACT

While only a small minority of professionals joining a professional service firm (PSF) make it to partnership, we know little about how the individuals themselves navigate that system –in particular, how they decide to stay and pursue the partnership track, what makes them leave the firm, and whether and when these decisions may co-exist. This study adopts a role expectations enactment lens to examine the strategies that individuals engage in to manage their careers, both those who seek to "make it" within the firm and those who may prepare their exit. Building on in-depth interviews with 60 pre-partnership professionals in accounting, consulting, and law, we uncover four anticipated career paths – partner-track, client-track, off-track and wait-and-see – and corresponding systematic variations in the ways that professionals enact their role with respect to partners and clients. We find that individual career agency is embedded in the proximate social structures that circumscribe professionals' role expectation enactment. In particular, findings highlight how partner-client portfolio constellations impinge on the ability to engage in specific forms of role enactment beyond what both the traditional PSF literature and the protean career lens would lead us to expect.

Key words: Role enactment, careers, professional service firms

INTRODUCTION

The forms and processes of career progression in professional services firms (PSFs) have been of increasing interest to organizational scholars. This is undoubtedly due both to the increase in the importance of service sector to contemporary advanced economies, and to the greater mobility and diversification of career paths that today characterizes professional knowledge workers (Galanter and Henderson 2008; Malhotra, Morris and Smets 2010; Malhotra, Smets and Morris 2016). So while careers are generally becoming less patterned and more idiosyncratic, observers have noted that PSF careers – especially those espousing the competitive advancement form known as the tournament or "up-or-out" promotion system (Galanter and Palay 1991; Malos and Campion 1995; Morris and Pinnington 1998) – come across as a model of orderly, stable careers (Cohen, 2015; Larson, 1977). Others have remarked, in contrast, that PSF careers nowadays are better seen as embodiments of the "boundaryless" (Arthur and Rousseau 1996) or Protean (Hall 2004) forms of careers, with workers who move freely between employers on the basis of their training, reputation, and network of contacts and information (e.g., Pinnington 2011).

Nevertheless, how people actually navigate their careers inside PSF's is only now starting to be examined. Despite the wealth of research about the benefits and costs of the up-or-out system in PSFs (Greenwood and Empson 2003; Malhotra et al. 2010; Malos and Campion 1995; Morris and Pinnington 1998; Pinnington and Morris 2003), we know surprisingly little about how the individuals themselves navigate that system. Recent research has uncovered the career advancement competences and practices used by early-stage professionals in a large law firm (Pinnington 2011) and the strategies employed by white women, black and minority ethnic employees in the legal profession (Tomlinson et al. 2013) to overcome exclusionary obstacles to their careers. Such work is starting to highlight the variety of career making practices and the scope for exercising individual agency in the enactment of careers in PSFs, but specific issues remain open for investigation.

In particular, given that the up-or-out system retains only relatively few individuals for partnership, it seems crucial to learn more about the strategies that the individuals engage in to manage their careers, both those who seek to "make it" within the firm and those who may prepare to exit. This is because forms of expected career progression influence how people enact their roles in the workplace – how they position themselves with others, what expectations of interaction they hold for the future, and how deeply they engage with their roles (Behky 2006) – such that, for example, a professional committed to the tournament system may perform her role differently from one for whom the PSF job is more of a stepping stone to an industry-based position later on.

To complement existing research and address this need, we report in this article the results of a qualitative study of the career making practices of 60 professionals from three large, partnership-form professional services firms. Our specific goal with this study, therefore, was to understand the different ways in which they enacted their roles, the career paths they saw themselves on, and the contextual elements they deemed as crucial for creating the conditions for those paths to happen. We made three research design choices to help us reach that goal.

First, we zoomed in this study on mid-career professionals - those professionals who have gained their technical competence but have not yet been put forward for partnership consideration under the up-or-out system. Prior findings about the importance of career stage for career-making suggest that this is an advantageous vantage point from which to investigate this issue. Early career seems to be the time for gaining formal recognition for one's technical competence, whereas later career is relatively better suited for bureaucratic and entrepreneurial activities (Cohen 2015; Devine, Britton, Mellor & Halfpenny, 2000; Anderson-Gough et al. 2001;

Pinnington 2011), but at mid-career those directions are just started to become delineated (Bensaou, Galunic & Jonczyk-Sédès, 2014). Furthermore, at mid-career in professional partnerships the vertical progression path to partner becomes simultaneously within reach and elusive. Given the relatively short time horizon to partnership consideration, career-making considerations are more salient and more urgent for professionals than either before or after the tournament happens, facilitating researchers' task of learning more about how they navigate their career paths.

Second, we took a dual focus on how professionals experienced their roles vis-à-vis partners *and* clients. The part played by client is a huge missing piece in the study of careers in PSFs (Cohen 2015). Although it has been long known that responding to expectations within the firm as well as from the clients is key for professionals' career-making success (Maister, 2003), in practice much less attention has been given to how professionals respond to clients' expectations. The few studies who have taken this question seriously have surfaced that clients are a major source of identity for junior professionals (Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson 2000), and that client relationships are a form of power for junior partners in most professional service firms (Blair-Loy, 2001; Briscoe and von Nordenflycht 2014) – insights that reinforce the need to understand better how professionals handle and nurture their client interactions while still on the partnership track.

Finally, we used a role expectations enactment lens to make sense of professionals' accounts of their experience. While roles represent expectations associated with social positions, and therefore can facilitate continuity of behavior over time (Hughes, 1958; Biddle, 1986), roles can also be loosely and dynamically structured, with expectations negotiated in interaction (Turner, 1986). Bringing a role expectations enactment lens to bear is useful for organizational researchers because it allows to understand the responses of the individuals to the structure – e.g., their agency (Mantere 2008) – *in addition* to taking seriously the effect of the proximate social structure on those individual responses (e.g., Fondas & Stewart, 1994; Bechky 2006). In particular, since mid-career professionals respond to expectations put on them by both partners and clients, the role enactment lens enables us to better understand career-making in PSF, in particular how professionals navigate between the 'within' and 'outside' career paths.

We used in-depth interviews to collect our data, and analyzed the transcripts using the procedures of grounded theory building. The results of our analyses indicate four different anticipated career paths for mid-career professionals: on-track towards partnership in the firm, client-track, off-track, and wait-and-see; more than half of the informants considered themselves to be on paths other than partnership track. We identified variations in the ways in which mid-career professionals enacted their role expectations across the spectrum of anticipated career paths, and some important contextual conditions that circumscribed this pattern of the role expectation enactment. We found that these conditions influenced the ability of individuals to engage in specific forms of role enactment beyond what both the traditional PSF literature and the protean career lens would lead us to expect. Beyond our contributions to career making in PSFs, our results also add to the literature on role enactment in organizations, by extending that research to roles embedded in multiple career progression paths.

Role Expectations and Enactment

A 'role' is traditionally defined as a set of behavioral expectations attached to a position in an organized set of social relationships (Katz and Kahn 1978; Merton, 1957). In organizations, work roles are the structured interdependencies that organize people's tasks and responsibilities (Ashforth, 2001; Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Stryker & Burke, 2000). As the nexus for how work is designed, communicated, accomplished, evaluated, and experienced (e.g., Welbourne, Johnson, & Erez, 1998), roles provide the basis on which individuals function in organizations.

Many scholars concur that while roles are objective elements in social structure, they cannot be taken as given but must be viewed in light of the actions taken by different people, both role occupants and role expectation senders, to enact roles and reshape the expectations of others – what has been called the negotiated order perspective on role taking (Strauss 1978, Turner 1962). Role expectations arise from the norms and demands of other role occupants and audiences, in particular, those directly associated with the focal role, called members of the role-set (Katz and Kahn 1978). In counterpart, role expectations enactment consists of the set of activities taken by role occupants to respond to those expectations set on them by role senders. The negotiated order perspective on role taking argues, however, there are different ways in which one set of role expectations can be enacted, and also that the way in which role expectations are enacted can feed back and influence the next cycle of role expectations sending. As such, individuals will have more latitude to reshape the expectations of others when definitions of roles are more ambiguous or vague (Turner 1962), when individuals have more latitude relative to their role senders (Merton 1957), or when conditions in the organizations or in the relationships between superiors and subordinates permit it (Fondas & Stewart, 1994). While early work on role theory was largely theoretical, recent research on role enactment has focused on the specific features of the occupational context that shape role taking, such as variations in career progression that people may expect in the circumstances in which they conduct their work (e.g., Bechky, 2006).

Role Enactment by Mid-Career Professionals in Partnerships

Although research attests to the trend towards corporatization of large PSFs (e.g., Empson, Cleaver & Allen, 2013), many PSFs are still typically operated as partnerships. The partnership form of governance seems to be particularly well suited to the management of knowledge workers (Greenwood & Empson, 2003). It incorporates two distinctive human resource practices: an *apprenticeship* system in which recently licensed professionals learn under the tutelage of seasoned partners and gain tacit knowledge; and an *up-or-out* approach to promotion, in which professionals considered unsuitable for admission to partnership exit the firm (Gilson & Mnookin, 1989; Galanter & Palay, 1991). These practices, coupled with a form of work control premised on collegiality and professionalism rather than hierarchy and direct authority (Greenwood et al., 1990) render partnerships particularly efficient providers of professional services.

These practices also create the conditions for particular ways in which professionals enact their roles, especially in the years before they reach the partnership stage. The first noteworthy aspect is the special relationship between pre-partnership professional and the partners – their primary role senders – which follows from the fact that partners are alternatively managers of young professionals on the projects at hand, and also owners of any extra business the juniors generate. Indeed, in the long run, partners are motivated to mentor and develop successful young professionals, to bring in new business to the firm, and thus to benefit partners as equity-holders in the firm. Nevertheless, in the short run, partners have incentives to delay valuable candidates about their chances of making partner (Nelson, 1992, p. 746), because the more a good manager or associate dedicates their effort to serving the partner's client, the better off the partner. In addition, when a manager gets promoted, the partner needs to find a replacement, which requires investment of time and effort, to bring them up to date on the history of the project, the idiosyncrasies of the client, and so on. These steps represent a cost that the partner would rather avoid, e.g., by giving managers less exposure to new clients or less autonomy in handling them. This situation has been referred to in the PSF literature as the trade-off between the short-term gains to the individual partners and the long-term gains to the firm (Hinings, Brown, & Greenwood, 1991). We argue that it also is a key determining feature for how pre-partnership professionals in PSFs enact their roles with respect to the partners.

The second particular aspect that has implications for role enactment by pre-partnership professionals, is the co-existence of another type of role set members, in addition to the partners – the clients. Clients are fundamental to PSFs - “PSF’s are organizations that trade mainly on the knowledge of their human capital, employees and producers-owners, to develop and deliver intangible solutions to client problems” (Morris & Empson, 1998: 610) – and professionals cannot achieve career success inside the firm without robust performance on the client front (e.g., Maister, 2003; Briscoe and von Nordenflycht 2014). The existence of competing sets of role expectations is not trivial. Dual foci of commitment may create role conflict (Katz and Kahn 1978) and eventually, result in reduced professional development and turnover for professional knowledge workers (Kinnie and Swart, 2012) if the expectations are not well aligned and not consistent with the professional’s own sense of priorities. Yet this may also set the stage for possible *greater* latitude in enactment of their role. Differences of power among those in the role set create the conditions for the role occupant to have more latitude in enacting the role (Merton 1957), for example, if conflicting powers neutralize one another, the status-occupant has relative freedom to proceed as he intended in the first place. Either way, the multiple demands coming from internal and external stakeholders are likely to require some juggling through prioritization, delegation or sequencing in the enactment of the mid-career PSF professionals’ roles.

Taking these aspects into account, we decided to apply a negotiated order perspective to the problem of constructing careers in PSFs, and investigate directly the question of how project managers in professional partnerships firms enact their role expectations vis-à-vis partners and clients, using in-depth interviews data.

METHOD

Setting and Data Collection

Setting. Our setting consists of three large, prominent partnerships in the consulting, auditing, and law industries. All three firms are significant players in their respective fields and regions. The accounting firm is a major international firm; we gained access to two of its main global offices, one in the US and one in the UK. The law firm and consultancy are both major European-based PSFs with offices worldwide, one headquartered in Germany and one in the UK. For both we interviewed people from the headquarter countries.

All three firms use relatively similar, long-established, and well-honed routines surrounding recruiting, professional development, and promotion. In addition, and important for our study, they employ comparable internal career paths leading to partnership. Across the firms, employees typically began their careers at respective entry level positions for their professions: junior associates in audit, trainees in law, or junior consultants. After approximately 5 years in audit and consulting and 5-6 years in law, young professionals are promoted to the position of "project manager" in audit and consultancy firms or "senior associates" in the law firm. In contrast, in law there seems to be fewer rungs on the ladder between junior associates and partners, the degrees of advancement on the internal career ladder being labelled according to time since qualification (i.e. "associate 3 years qualified"), whereas in consulting and audit more formal titles mark the progression. Nevertheless, for all three groups, the point of promotion to project manager/ senior associates represents roughly the mid-stage of their professional development, half-way of the required time to partnership consideration.

Consequently, our study focused on the experience of service professionals who were at about 18-months into their roles as project managers. We chose this moment carefully. Prior to this promotion, service professionals are focused on technical work and learning the special procedures and skills necessary to their respective subfields of expertise. There they also tended to be the junior members of client project teams, and so faced a good deal of "grunt" work. As project managers or senior associates, they are given greater responsibilities and independence, including managerial responsibilities (i.e., subordinates), direct access to partners and (particularly for auditors and consultants) the leadership of client project teams and greater client-facing duties and interactions. In other words, this is their first significant managerial role and the point in their careers at which they move beyond the technical aspects of the job and start to be involved in the 'big picture' that is their particular professional practice. We considered that a year and a half after the promotion to project manager allowed professionals to settle into their new work (away from more technical work and towards more managerial work) and so lift their minds towards the future and their careers.

This similarity in the internal career structure across the firms made them good grounds for studying how mid-career professionals approached their roles and career paths. Nevertheless, there are also differences in the roles of the mid-career professionals across the three firms in our sample that could be relevant for our study, stemming primarily from the different levels of engagement with clients and depth and frequency of interactions with client representatives that mid-career professionals typically are exposed to. Consulting, law and accounting differ in the level of standardization of services, that is, the balance between customized and commoditized services (Greenwood & Empson, 2003). Accounting (and probably consulting) work typically entails a lot of face-to-face client interaction, whereas law requires comparatively little (Malhotra & Morris, 2009). Furthermore, in contrast to law and audit where interactions are often with the headquarters of the client firm, consulting work often deals with a variety of operational issues, not necessarily all at the client headquarters. Also, because of its federal government structure, business activities in Germany tend to be very dispersed (and not centralised in a capital region), hence we can imagine for example that consultants in Germany spend an even greater amount of time at the local clients than would consultants in other, more centralised business regions, in Europe or in the US.

In sum, given the importance of clients to professionals' careers in PSFs, and the relative lack of understanding of this aspect of professionals' role enactment in prior literature, we believed that using data from firms that vary on the level of client interaction would be a beneficial trait for inducing more robust theory about role enactment and career paths in PSFs. To the extent that we note similarities across diverse samples, this would offer even firmer grounding for general propositions than those observed in homogenous samples (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991).

Data Collection. The study reported here is part of a larger research project we conducted on professionals' experience of their work roles and importance of relationships for getting their job done, for which we had secured backing from some of the senior partners in the firms. The firms also provided a "charge code" to account for the time professionals would spent talking to us to make the commitment easier to bear. With the help of the HR departments, we identified those professionals who were at the requisite point of their careers in the firms given our research interests, and solicited their help. All people who were contacted agreed to participate.

The sample used for analysis in this study consists of those respondents who answered our request for an in-depth interview 18 months after their last promotion. Although we conducted the interviews with 68 respondents, we had eliminated from the sample, for the purposes of this study, the interviews with eight lawyers who were either too junior (junior associates) or too senior (already promoted to partnership), in comparison to their accounting and consulting counterparts. The final sample used for analysis in this paper consists of 60 respondents: 35 accountants, 17 consultants, and 8 lawyers.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured, lasted about 1.5-2 hours long, and were conducted by at least one, and typically two, of the study's authors. The interviews started with open ended questions about the past year's highlights and any major professional or personal events, such as achievements or failures, to help anchor discussions in concrete events, then proceeded in a systematic fashion to ask about how the professionals were handling their roles, in particular with partners and clients, at the present time, and any thoughts related to the future. While the interviews did not prompt informants to explicitly assess their chances on the partnership track, the interviews aimed to get a sense of the envisioned professional future of the interviewee, especially if they intended to stay with the PSF or if they were thinking about career alternatives and what reasons they had for this envisioned career alternative.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the interview data following established techniques and procedures for grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001). Specifically, our investigation consisted of four analytic steps (cf. Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010).

In the first stage we read the transcripts in detail, seeking to identify and highlight the sections in which the informant referred to actions, circumstances, and thoughts related to partner and client interactions, and to their career. Each participant transcript was read by at least two researchers, to better reach triangulation. As we read, we each created a case summary that captured the key aspects of the respondent's account relative to partners, clients, and career prospects and preferences. Then we met to discuss our case summaries and ensure that our understanding of the data was aligned. Discrepancies were discussed and the case summary for each respondent enriched. At the end, a final summary for each of the respondents was created.

Stage two consisted of identifying the elements that were recurrent across multiple informants with respect to their interactions with partners and clients and their thoughts relative to their careers. The first two authors read all the case summaries and identified, within each heading among partner, client, and career, the elements that would fall under the three categories of: a) actions, or practices that the informant reported engaging in or avoiding; b) circumstances, that the respondent mentioned as influential for the interaction with the partner or client or for their career; and c) any career goals, preferences or forecasts, that would be mentioned as being influential or in some way related to an outcome, either in the interactions with partners or clients or at the broader career level. Similarities in actions, circumstances and preferences started to emerge as soon as we started comparing notes across informants, and we settled on the terms (first order themes) that described the emerging ideas. Our list of codes was discussed and agreed upon for each additional case, and we erred on being more exhaustive rather than leaving out categories at this point. The result of this stage of the analysis was a two-by-two matrix of the practices and circumstances invoked with, in turn, partners and client, as well as a list of the career preferences expressed.

The objective of the third stage was to understand how these practices, circumstances, and preferences were related to one another in meaningful ways. For this, we decided to group the respondents by their perceived anticipated career path. The first two authors went back to the case summaries and read the categories referring to the informants' careers. The on-track career emerged immediately as a very strong reference point. From there, we saw other anticipated career paths taking shape, some almost in opposition to the "on-track" (client-track) and some more ambiguously situated between the two. In this process, some of the career forms were collapsed into one overarching career category, while others were separated. For instance, "on track with reservations" was eventually folded into "wait-and-see", and "off-track" emerged as distinct from "client-track". We each did our assignments independently on all the cases, then compared our coding and discussed until agreement was reached, either by settling on assigning the informant to one of the existing groups or by changing the categorization scheme. At the end of this process, we intersected informants' group assignment with the second-order practices themes identified in stage two, to obtain a mapping of what kinds of practices are most strongly associated with each of the four anticipated career paths we identified.

Finally, in stage four, our objective was to condense the large number of first-order themes under practices and circumstances into a more theory-relevant cluster of aggregate dimensions. For this, we turned to the literature, in particular on the importance of power and role taking (e.g., Merton 1957) to better understand the particularities of managers' roles enactment practices. Going back and forth between literature and our findings gave rise to our final theoretical model.

FINDINGS

We organize our findings in two parts. In part one, we present the four groups of professionals we found in our sample, as indicated by their anticipated career paths, along with the forms of role expectation enactment each engaged in and the career preferences that characterized them. In part two we present the contextual conditions that respondents referred to, in order to situate their actions and preferences.

PSF Managers' Forms of Role Expectation Enactment by Anticipated Career Path

The anticipated career paths seen by our respondents led us to categorize them into four distinct groups: on-track, client-track, off-track, and wait-and-see.

On-Track The first group consisted of managers who saw themselves as being able and willing to stay with the firm at least until the point of entry to partnership – the *on-track group*. This group reported a clear aspiration to make it to partner and referred to various internal signals that made them believe that the organization also perceived them to be on the route to partnership. About forty percent of our respondents fell in this category.

Accordingly, the role expectation enactment practices of this group targeted both the long and the short term. In the short term, on-track managers sought to mold the interactions they had with partners and clients on their current projects. However, more surprising to us was the high degree of importance given by these managers to practices that were aimed at the long-term, in particular, the substantial efforts they made to control the portfolio of projects and clients they worked for.

Thus perhaps the key most clearly differentiating practice of the on-track managers compared to the other groups was *acting on the role set* – efforts aimed at influencing which partners and clients they would work for in the future. This meant not only making sure that they were "well-spaced out" with a critical number of partners who would know the manager when discussed in a promotion committee. It also implied "prioritizing partner contacts with important partners getting priority" (Laura, accountant) and making sure that they built close ties with those powerful partners. For instance, Joe, another accountant, put effort into being on the same projects as his counselling partner as this ensured him to be working with somebody important to him he had already established a relationship with. More broadly, when choosing projects, professionals chose by partners rather than content, such that they preferred a project headed by a powerful partner even if the client or topic were not their top choice.

Similarly, on-track managers spoke of targeting specific clients to work for: "You look at the position you'd have with new client, strategically choose where you could move up" (Susan, accountant). In some cases, this could also mean trying to break away from certain clients that did not offer them the visibility and career boost that they were seeking. Derek (an accountant) successfully negotiated with the partners his transition off this particular client: "I put my foot down and said I definitely do not want to do this."

The second common long-term practice was *signaling successful role enactment* – making sure that they were recognized by partners as successful in their role. As one of them explained eloquently: “One of the things that I learned last year in getting promoted to manager is that you have to market yourself and that is very important in a firm so big. You have to make yourself stand out. You will not, just working hard and doing your job is not enough. You have to show people and let them know how hard you’re working.” (Brian, accountant). In practice, the most common ways to achieve this was through building visibility with partners – for instance, by making sure that their performance was noticed and talked about by different partners – and by specializing in certain client issues. For the latter, positioning oneself as a client or topic specialist was a way to signal successful role enactment, important because “when you’re evolving from a product manager more into acquisition things you have to stand for an issue or for topics so that the partners have a good reason why they choose you besides that you are doing.” (Christopher, consultant). Finally, client-track managers reported actively taking on extra activities such as teaching courses to interns and first year associates, getting involved in firm PR events, recruitment, writing articles for practitioner journals, “showing initiative, demonstrating that you go the extra mile for the organization” – as one of them said, “all the sort of stuff to get my name out there”, and “make sure that everybody else is pleased with me and knows who I am” (Janet, accountant). These activities were notable because they were not tied to a specific project, but were specifically aimed at demonstrating the managers’ contribution to the organization as a whole.

On their current projects, on-track professionals engaged in two main forms of role expectation enactment: anticipatory expectations enactment and controlling the observability of their activities. By *anticipatory role enactment* we mean those efforts to demonstrate that one already has the skills and capabilities required for the next career position –either senior manager or partner. Thus, on-track managers were eager to act "as if" - "doing what people might perceive to be the partner's role" (Janet, accountant). As Steven, an accountant explained: "I like to start thinking about the positions that lie ahead of me next, senior manager and ultimately partner, so I like to think and act, start incorporating some of those behaviors into what I'm doing now." In practice, the most common way to do this was to attempt to sell business, either to new or continuing clients: "There are other projects spinning off and I got the chance to set up a quite good network within the client. So, with this network I was able, especially within the last half year, to sell, on the one hand, follow-up projects, but on the other hand also smaller new projects" (Christopher, consultant).

One last set of practices used were what we refer to as *controlling the observability of their activities.* With respect to partners, this meant reducing or filtering the flow of information to the partner – keeping the partners informed only of what they needed to know, and not overwhelming them with too much information. As Christopher, a consultant, explained: "Don't confuse them and give them the information they need for their relationships and their client handling. Don't use them for things I should solve, and try to keep them away from some parts of the client." Managers referred to this practice as focusing the partners' attention. With clients, interestingly, we observed that the opposite strategy was used –making the managers' work for them as highly visible as possible. This included, but was not limited to, being available to the clients whenever and for whatever information needed: "It's important to clients to feel they have someone available... You need to go out of your way, even though you're busy with something else, you must still go out of your way to do it" (Laura, accountant).

In terms of their career priorities, we found great homogeneity among these respondents. First, they seemed focused and clear about the attractiveness of climbing the career ladder in the professional service firm, "the place I wanted to be" (Peter, accountant). The career paths envisioned by the on-track managers were closest to the traditional PSF career, the vertical intra-organizational progression path that culminated with partnership. Second, we found considerable alertness among these respondents of what it would take to build a career in their firms, in particular awareness of the dual importance of clients and partners for one's internal success: "Project management and partner development" (Fred, consultant). This simultaneous dual emphasis – which they referred to alternately as two strategies, two focuses, or two drivers of their careers – was a key distinguishing element of the career strategies of the on-track managers.

Client-track The second group were the ones who stated that they wanted to leave the firm in the near future, in order to join a client organization – the *client-track group.* Participants in the client-track group were either referring to specific clients that they wanted to join in the near future, or they were stating that in the medium-term they would be looking for a different type of work, on the "other side", for instance, strategy consultants would look for corporate positions allowing them to implement strategy, and the lawyers would become part of internal counsel departments. Fundamentally, what distinguished this group from on-track respondents was that even when their PSF had signaled that they could be considered "partner material," these managers argued that their primary career interest was to eventually work in a corporate context. We classified about a quarter of our respondents in this category.

The client-track managers exercised most of the same strategies used by the on-track managers, but with different emphases. In particular, where the client-track managers stood out was the extent of their *anticipatory expectations enactment* practices with the clients (but not so much with the partners). This comprised efforts to acquire and use a more elaborate understanding of the client's business and industry, than the pure execution of the project at hand would require ("I think it's showing that you know what's going on, you understand their complex problems, and you know where they're coming from. As long as you can show this, instead of just saying “you have to do this”, they’ll respect you more." (Lauren, accountant). In addition, for some of the managers it also referred to efforts to demonstrate that one has not just the technical knowledge but also the personal ability to deal with the client issues in a more elaborate manner. Finally, we included in this category of practices giving client priority over other internal project matters. Thus, distinct from on-track managers, several client-track respondents explained that they prioritized internal demands, even when coming from partners, *second* to client demands:

> "To me it’s always the client that comes first – if the client has asked me to do something I will do that first. And sometimes you do have to look at the call.... So it’s judgment, and not just the fact that it’s partners asking." (Maggie, accountant).

Overall, what is interesting to notice about the anticipatory expectation enactment efforts of this group is that, in contrast to on-track managers who were acting the role of senior manager/partner vis-a-vis their clients by taking charge of the project and engaging in new business opportunities, with the eventual goal of selling more business for the PSF, the client-track managers focused on satisfying the client fully, even above and beyond the technical requirements of the project, but with much less clear interest to directly contribute to the PSFs business results.

For other role enactment practices, and compared to the on-track respondents, the client-track managers seemed generally less engaged in managing partners’ expectations. For instance, they seemed to act little on the role set by choosing projects on the basis of partners leading them, but described explicitly selecting projects for the specific clients to work on. They also engaged less in signaling successful role enactment towards the partners, and when they did it, it was mainly via expertise on client work, rather than the set of other firm-related activities than the on-track managers mentioned: "When it comes to acquisitions, an associate partner will do it with people he trusts most, who he thinks are experts. It’s important to show the people that you are an expert in a certain field" (Roland, consultant) There was evidence for *controlling the observability* of activities with the partners, much like what the on-track managers were doing, such that partners would get to see only some of the aspects of the ongoing project – "it's a kind of atmosphere you create […] they don't want to hear what's going wrong" (Will, consultant) – but we saw less evidence of explicitly controlling the observability of activities with clients, by explicitly making actions or results more visible, as we had seen it done by the on-track managers.

Finally, the accounts of the client-track managers showed some evidence for a new form of role expectation enactment, which we found much more commonly expressed by the managers in the off-track and wait-and-see groups – *expectation fulfilment* – which we use to mean the set of passive ways of executing their role and fulfilling the expectations of those they worked for. In the case of the client-track respondents, it captured how some of them took on a supporting role for the partner in front of the client. For example, "The project manager is somebody who takes care of a subject for the partner… You are always thinking about supporting the acquisitions of the partner" (Thomas, consultant). This form of role enactment was not present in the accounts of the on-track managers.

With respect to their career preferences, the client-track managers expressed a strong interest in developing a career in the industry, but there was variation in how clearly they saw this happening. About half expressed a strong career preference for doing client work immediately, and thus were contemplating making a move to leave the PSF in the short term. They spoke to the feeling of being both more appreciated and more valued at a client's than in the PSF, and also of finding more intellectual challenge and satisfaction from that kind of work. A typical quote is: "I got into consulting because I wanted to learn and I have the feeling that consulting is not really giving me satisfaction over a long period so I want to really create or produce something.

Industry offers a broader focus.” (Will, consultant). Alternatively, some spoke to feeling like they already worked for the clients –not for the PSF: “It’s quite odd, I sometimes feel that I am not really working for my firm, but I am working for my clients. They are the most important part. That is my work life” (Like, accountant). Nevertheless, others were more ambivalent. As Joshua from AuditCo explained: “I have liked the firm, and enjoyed it, think it is a great firm, but in terms of where I want my career to go and what I want to do, is this what I want to do long term? No. This is gut instinct.” People like him described “being at a crossroads” between staying and going, with the strong pull of client-side work counterbalanced by the excitement and fast pace of work in the PSF.

Off-Track The third group, the off-track group, were service professionals who did not have any particular client/corporate context aspirations of their own but who had come to realize that their employer would probably not promote them to partner, or they had come themselves to the conclusion that they were simply not willing to minimize their private lives for the next couple of years, an implicit necessary condition for being successful in the firm. Leaving the firm was hence an anticipated default mode yet, unlike the client-track managers, this outcome did not seem driven by the professionals being intrinsically more attracted by client-side work. About fifteen percent of our respondents were classified as off-track.

These managers engaged in very few forms of expectation enactment in common with either the on-track or the client-track group. For instance, the only form of *signaling successful role enactment* was by providing good work for current clients, which could be helpful with partner impression management. Instead, they enacted their role mostly as *expectation fulfilment* towards both partners and clients. They saw engaging in doing quality work and working hard as the ways to gain support and further their careers beyond the projects at hand. For example Robert, an accountant, states that “Quality and timeliness are important, so I proactively approach them with the information that I think they are going to want and I try to do this as quickly and as often as possible."

Comparing the off-track professionals with the client-track professionals, the off-track professionals did not show either any preference to join a client or a particular focus on the client project work. Many, however, invoked work-life balance considerations to make sense of their anticipated leaving the PSF, as was the loss of motivation or interest.

Interestingly, these accounts were also referring in some detail to non-anticipated, difficult-to manage-circumstantial factors that seemed to preclude partner track for the service professional. Some of the factors that appeared in these accounts included, for instance, being pigeonholed on one large client for whom one's work had not been particularly successful or visible; working for partners outside of one's core competence group, again with repercussion on visibility and reputation among the wider partnership; or not having the support of influential partners. We come back to these factors more fully in the section dedicated to contextual conditions.

Wait-and-See The fourth and last group was the least sure how their career might evolve, either because they had doubts about the viability or attractiveness of the partner track for their own career, or because they did not want to express those preferences (yet). We labelled them the *wait-and-see* group, and they comprise about twenty percent of our respondent sample.

The "wait-and-see" group felt a bit in the limbo: they had neither made up their mind that a corporate client career was the career path to pursue nor had they felt that the organization had given them any definite negative signals that would preclude partner track. Thus, the group included some who felt that they were on track (from the point of view of the firm), but had reservations about staying, and others who seemed unsure whether they were on track or not, yet did not exclude partner track as a possibility. Another interesting feature is that this group was particularly reflective about an entire range of contingency factors that needed "to be right" for a manager to remain on partner track.

In terms of actions we found a mix between client-bound and on-track professionals and one element shared with the off-track group. Similar to the off-track group these professionals were not making any particular efforts to work for particular partners or clients but were partly relying on getting recognition for the quality of their hard work. Unlike the on-track professionals, we did not find any behavior to build visibility with the partners. However, very much like the on-track professionals, the wait-and-see managers were already acting as a senior manager or partner as they engaged in selling additional business. They were also controlling the observability of their activities by conscious efforts to keep the partners away from some parts of the work. Paul, a consultant, explains: "I would suffer if I have too much contact with too many partners, it can be very straining." At the same time, similar to the client-track group, many in the wait-and-see group were playing supporting role to the partner in client-facing situations, engaging in expectation fulfillment with respect to partners.

In terms of career preferences this group showed quite a few similarities with the client-track and with the off-track group. They referred to work-life balance considerations ("I'm not going to get suckered into the "If you just stay every weekend then you'll impress people" type mentality. I'd rather go and do something else. That's not the sort of partnership I want to be a part of." – Michael, lawyer), and inner satisfaction ("I haven't got my career planned out, I do things and if I like them I stick with them and if I don't, I'll look for something else." – Betty, accountant) as priming promotion considerations. They did not exclude promotion to partnership but were demonstrating a rather pragmatic approach on the topic.

As mentioned, we also found this group to be particularly reflective about the conditions that impinged on their further development. Several referred to overall economic conditions (e.g., "I doubt that my team will grow enough in the next few years to allow for four additional partners", said Michael, a lawyer) but also to project constellations that condemned them to be "stuck" on one client and to negative partner relationships with the potential to damage within-firm career aspirations.

We turn next to presenting in detail the contextual conditions that managers across the four groups referred to when discussing their role expectation enactment practices.

Contextual Conditions Invoked as Relevant for Managers' Role Expectation Enactment Practices

We found that three main sets of role-related conditions affected how professionals enacted their role expectations. The first refers to the structure of the partner and client portfolio to date, and includes size, diversity, stability and prominence of the set of partners and clients worked for. The second set of conditions comprise the existence and quality of support relationships with partners. The third set of conditions comprise the current project structure that the manager is working in, and particular as it influences the manager's exposure to partners and clients.

Structure of partner and client portfolio to date. The structure of the project and client portfolio with whom the manager had worked with since joining the firm was mentioned by most of our respondents as the number one determining factor of their career paths.

There was a general consensus that a broader project portfolio was better because it gave managers broader visibility within their PSF as the likelihood of working with different partners was greater. This mattered because "when you are looking to get promoted you want to work with as many different partners as possible, to raise your profile," as Betty, an accountant, explained. As our respondents explained, the firms had a promotion process where a majority of partners in the committee needed to back candidates put forward for promotion, so previous exposure to a good number of partners was seen as necessary "to stand a chance". This basic idea had wide repercussions for how managers evaluated different partner and client portfolio configurations.

So one type of "bad" portfolio was one in which the manager was working for few partners, or partners who were not widely known inside the firm. A typical case was managers reporting to be working for partners outside their competence center/expertise group. While they understood that they had been allocated to these projects because the firm needed their expertise on projects outside of their own group, managers felt that this would damage their future partner track prospects because "the partners in my group may not know me as I do not interact with them." (Helen, accountant), in other words, that they were not getting the visibility and partner recognition they needed *inside* their group. Daniel, an accountant, for example explained that such projects were "bad projects because you are reporting ultimately to partners who aren't in your group, you are busting your ass for someone who can't really help you that much in your further career. Ultimately you are not getting any exposure for yourself, any reputation for yourself in what is the area you are supposed to be working in."

Another type of "dangerous" portfolio was one which, similarly, was not diversified or visible enough, but this time with respect to the clients. A few of the managers voiced concerns about "being stuck on one big client" and reported to be "pigeonholed," which they perceived to significantly decrease their chances of future promotion. Luke, an audit manager elaborated: "I can make a partner by being a specialist in investment management, I can't make partner or senior manager by being a specialist in […], my one and only client." This is mainly because exclusively staffed on one big client "limits [my] ability to branch out to other people" (Andrew), meaning that it hampered his chances to take on new projects headed by different partners. He concluded, "my chances of promotion go down if I am not diversifying clients." A portfolio of clients too much in flux, however, was also seen as detrimental; it connoted too much uncertainty and the potential for work to not be recognized by either important partners or clients.

Prominence of partners and clients worked for was also considered important. Since working for an influential partner would give exposure to a superior with a direct voice in one's future promotion process ("vocal partners… that everybody respects"), some managers targeted explicitly work for such partners, even at the cost of taking on less-than-ideal clients: "I really want to work with him [influential partner] and I don't care too much about if the client is good for me but I want to work with him, so I'll do that job" (Frank, accountant).

Others opted for influential clients, as a portfolio of powerful, important clients could also play a role in one's promotion chances. These professionals pointed to a direct link between the prominence of the clients and their future success, feeling that "owning" certain key client contacts were a source of power that could be traded against promotion.

Existence and quality of support from partners and clients. A distinct condition was the development, over time, of support relationships with key partners and client people. Support relationship with partners were of course multi-faceted; learning was an important element ("John brings out the best in me, his management style is just exactly what I respond to very well, he is very reassuring, very complementary" – Zack, audit). But partner support relationships were also seen as buffers against career derailment: unless you have a partner to follow your career path, to "take you along and make sure that everything is going according to plan, you have to do it on your own" (Ben, audit). Without a sponsor, even more pro-activity would be needed to make the career go "according to plan", in other words. Thus, quality of the relationships with partners was mentioned by many of our respondents as determinant for one's success in the firm:

> "[You] have to have a good partner because we have a lot of partners who are not good executives. You can really see if the team members have such a partner who is just not

very powerful, the career of these team members is very slow. So you can really see it." (Marc, consultant).

Some had been fortunate enough to have met an informal mentor during their formative years with their employer. Yet even those who were benefitting from some continued mentorship commented on the contingencies inherent in those mentoring relations, such as the number of mentees one partner was supporting at a time.

Development of support relationships with certain client representatives was also seen as a useful condition for progression by some of our informants. It was seen as helpful for being positioned to hear about new business opportunities ("when it came down to the proposal for the new piece of work, it was only me that knew all the key people […] and got all the gossip basically" - Janet, accountant) in order to gain new "spin-off" projects. Perhaps the most complete explanation of how this works was given by Martin, a consultant, stating that "you also win projects because of your social life, and having a good contact through your clients, is sometimes more important than your concept on paper."

Position relative to partners and clients on current projects. The final set of conditions captures one's position relative to clients and partners today. The idiosyncrasies of the managers' current project structure – the particular staffing, the pecking order at the client, and the project size – featured centrally among the conditions managers described as influencing the ways in which they were able to enact their roles. Regarding staffing, for instance, "if you are number 3 out of 10 people in the project team" (Frank, audit), a manager would not have access to the top two people at the client, or at least not on a level where they would truly get to know them. And since gaining visibility with the client and its most senior representatives was seen as a key to owning client relationships and thereby future selling potential, the position managers occupy with the client team is very important: “Are you their main contact or can you move up to this slot?” (Susan, audit manager).

The project staffing constellation also mattered for the degree of partner exposure. Some accounts testified of the missed visibility opportunities they were suffering from. Victor (audit) explained that he found it hard to go around the senior manager on the project to see the partner; in such conditions, as he said, “you have to be rather crafty for getting any partner exposure”. As a consequence, some managers had clear preferences about size of the projects they prefer to work on, for instance “mid-sized projects where you are directly responsible to the client are great” (Martin).

Yet managers also stated that project size and most of the time also the staffing on projects were not factors in their control. Favorable contingency factors greatly facilitated the managers’ role expectations enactment. For instance, Frank (audit), recalled how the departure of the senior manager on his project had created space for him to move into a prime position in the project pecking order, enabling him to demonstrate senior manager qualities and giving him the possibility to shine in front of the client and to forge stronger ties with the partners heading this key client.

After all, informants realized that, despite their efforts to influence which projects they would work on, in the end they were often they ones being chosen – instead of being able to choose – by partners or clients: “I think it’s more in reverse that they will choose the associates they like working with rather than we choose the partner we like working with” (Jonathan, lawyer).

Contextual Conditions by Anticipated Career Path

Re-analyzing the accounts provided by our respondents across career paths groups, we found interesting examples of the various consequences these structural conditions can have on managers' career prospects. Principally, comparisons of the off-track group's accounts to the on-track and client-track accounts provided ample evidence in the form of stories and anecdotes about how off-track professionals had been previously interested in pursuing partner track, yet they were unable to make the key strategies used by the on-track professionals work (e.g., acting on the role set, or signaling successful role enactment).

We found that off-track professionals all highlighted the adversity of one or multiple contingency factors related to dimensions of their role set. In one such example, Robert, an accountant stuck on a bad time consuming client, found himself unable to get off the project thereby limiting his visibility and potential exposure to other important partners: "I'm in difficult situation… I had been promoted last year on the client. So for you to get promoted and turn around and say thank you for supporting me, I don't want to be on this client anymore, it's rather impossible."

Nevertheless, when we circled back to the accounts of the on-track managers to look whether similar factors had impacted them as well, we did find evidence of on-track managers who had suffered from similar unfavorable contingencies yet who had managed, they reported, to turn the adverse situation around, for example by transferring off a dead-end project or adapting their project portfolio. Based on the advice from an informal mentor partner he had grown up with in the firm, Derek, another accountant negotiated with the project partner to transition off a project that he did not enjoy working on and that was limiting his career prospects. He admitted that handling the transition of a project was a very delicate situation where you "cannot just say "I want off"." Henry, also from AuditCo, described a similar situation, "where one particular partner wanted to pull me off all my engagements and put me on this client for an entire year […] – the sort of stuff I was hoping not to do – so I started really going to one of the other partners I was still working for, saying look, how shall I handle this person?"

What these few accounts about project change and project portfolio reshaping share is that all managers getting back "on track" were in the position to draw support from relationships they had built in the past with other partners. The few stories about getting off/resolving career deadlocks thereby all pointed to the crucial role of the manager's past history in the firm. Managers who were facing similar bad project constellations as Derek and Henry but who had not come across powerful mentors and sponsors among the partners in the past remained stuck and anticipated leaving the firm in the near future.

Indeed, many of the client-track and the off-track managers' accounts shared a theme in the poor quality of relationships with partners, and lack of support/sponsorship from above. For instance, Will (consultant) complained about lack of partner support in critical situations: "So whenever problems occurred where he [the partner] would need to stand in for my person, against other Partners or Associate Partners, he would leave me in the rain," while Simon, a lawyer, cautioned against negative relationships with partners: "If you had a serious fall out … […] if you had a serious problem with one working relationship, then you're probably not going to make partner anyway." As one consultant said, "I feel more valued by my clients than my own management." (Clarissa).

Understanding Role Enactment at Mid-Career in PSFs

Taken together, our findings suggest three key insights. The first is that the existence of two career paths possible for managers in PSFs (the internal and external paths) creates the conditions for a wide set of role enactment practices to co-exist. The managers do not all enact their roles in the same way, and there are clear differences between those managers who see themselves more clearly on the internal path, vs. those who see themselves on the external path, and those who are in between. The high degree of incertitude about which path to take, and when, that marks the majority of our respondents' accounts is evidence against the notion of an over-orderly career path for PSF professionals.

The second insight addresses the delicate balance that professionals must strike between fulfilling the expectations put on them by partners vs. clients. The two sets of role senders were present in the accounts of all of our respondents, but the ways in which the professionals handled the expectations coming from each varied largely. Indeed, different mechanisms may guide role expectations situations towards stability (Merton 1957), of which two key ones are the relative importance of the role set members' expectations for the focal person's behavior and intended outcome, and the differences of power among the role set members. We see that those mid-career professionals who see themselves as being on-track for partnership – and who are thus willing to undergo an evaluation and decision made entirely by the current partners of the PSF– place relatively more importance on the partners' demands, making sure that those expectations are fulfilled above and beyond requirements. This is consistent with classic role theory that views superiors as main role senders (e.g., Graen and Scandura 1987). In contrast, we see that professionals who see themselves as being on client-track or who are undecided yet (wait-and-see), vary in their emphasis on client vs. partner prioritization. Finally, we note, throughout our sample, an awareness of and concern about the relative power of the partners in one's role-set; regardless of their anticipated career path, the professionals refer to the weight that one very influential partner or prominent client can have on "making or breaking" the desired path for the manager.

The third key insight is that role enactment practices and contextual conditions feed into each other over time, such that a manager's way of enacting their role today will shape to some extent the conditions he or she will face tomorrow, which in turn will limit or expand the set of practices he or she will use to enact the role. On the one hand, professionals enacted their role expectation in a context largely shaped by the long-term conditions in their partners-clients role set. These included the size, diversity, stability and prominence of the role set (whether the portfolio of partners and clients worked for has expanded or diversified over time, whether it comprised many different partners and clients or just a couple, and whether these partners and clients were influential or marginal), strength of relationship with role set members, and whether they benefitted from sponsorship from role set members. These conditions seemed to matter greatly to whether the professionals saw themselves as being on track or not. But the reverse was also important: professionals, especially those who saw themselves as on-track, felt that the actions they took, via the role enactment practices they engaged in, could make a difference in the long term conditions, for example, by acting on the role set to influence what partners and projects to work on and positioning themselves for extra visibility with influential partners and clients.

Finally, conditions in the partners-clients role set in the present also played an important role in this dynamic because they enabled (or not) the professional to act on the long-term conditions in the role set. Whether the project manager had enough exposure to the role senders (the partners and clients on the ongoing projects), whether he or she had been explicitly chosen for the job or not, the prominence of the current role senders - all had an influence on how much the manager was able to enact his or her role in a more pro-active way, and therefore improve their reputation and career prospects for the future. Seemingly small things could clinch a particularly good turn of events, for example, a senior manager leaving opening space for the current manager to “naturally” grow into this new role and gain considerable partner exposure or, conversely, derail a previously solid project portfolio, for example, when a manager gets allocated to a “dead-end” project. Hence, the apprehension we saw in many of our informants’ accounts about being stuck on bad projects in the short term, and their mounting concern that once certain bad turn of events happen – especially later in their tenure as pre-partnership managers – the die is cast.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Through interviews with 60 professionals, we found that in conditions of dual career paths, competing role expectations and up-or-out mobility, such as the kind that we see in PSFs, people enact role expectations in various, albeit highly circumscribed, ways. Our work provides a detailed picture of the interplay between the respective conditions and the strategies used for role enactment. It demonstrates in particular how role enactment strategies are dependent on conditions in partner-client portfolio that enable or heavily constrain a PSF professional's margin for actively shaping her role, highlighting the importance of the path-to-date of the professional in that context.

Implications for Research on Careers in PSFs

We started our article by pointing out that careers in PSFs have often been portrayed in archetypical terms, as models of either upwards-oriented, traditional careers, or as Protean (self-made) or "boundaryless" careers (Pinnington 2011). We do find some echoes of these archetypical careers: the "client-track" professionals fit somewhat the description of the Protean careerists, whereas the "on-track" professionals were closest to embodying the model of orderly PSF career. However, much more of our findings are about deviations from these archetypes than about conformity to them. Two of our four groups are professionals who do not fit either of the two stereotypes. Even for the two groups closer to the stereotypes, the evidence speaks to the diversity of practices they embrace, and to the limiting influence of cumulative circumstances.

Our study builds on recent work that has started to question the notion of careers in PSFs as models of strictly meritocratic career paths – whereby constant performance measurement combined with a strict up-or-out promotion system would lead to only the best performers making their way to the top. For instance, while we do not focus in this paper on the political aspects inherent in this process (e.g., Grey 1998; Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson 2000), our findings are consistent with the notion that “making it” in the professional services necessitates a proactive approach to demonstrating individual results and contribution (e.g., Grey 1994; Mueller, Carter and Ross-Smith 2011) as well as making efforts to “fit-in” a prevailing model of success within the firm (e.g., Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008).

More directly, our work adds to the burgeoning area of research on career self-management in PSFs (Cohen 2015; King 2004; Pinnington 2011; Tomlinson et al. 2013), where we contribute the simultaneous focus on individual efforts as well as on the conditions that influence how able individuals are to engage in different kinds of efforts. We take an interactionist perspective – the kind of explanation that involves both structure and agency of individuals – and dwell on the interplay between role structure and role enactment. In addition, we take seriously the idea that the internal career path is not the only alternative pursued by mid-career professionals, a premise which allows us to uncover a wider range of role enactment practices than prior literature on career self-management in professional services firms has done. As a result, our findings paint a somewhat different picture of career paths which are considerably influenced by contextual factors out of the professionals’ control. Knowledge professionals do have latitude to shape and refine their roles. However, especially in unfavorable conditions, that latitude seems dependent on the professionals’ capacity to draw on conditions in the role set – relationships and expectations – that they need to have developed in the past, either by luck of circumstances or by their own previous actions. Thus, our research suggests that it is important to understand professionals’ career self-management practices in context of the role-structuring conditions they face today and that have accumulated over time.

We also investigate directly the role of clients in professionals' career construction, a part largely missing from prior research especially at it concerns careers beyond the entry-point (Cohen 2015; see also Anderson-Gough et al. 1988, Cohen, Wilkinson, Arnold & Finn, 2005). We find that although clients are a strong pull for mid-careers professionals away from their internal careers, especially those who do not find that the upwards internal career to reflect their own career preferences, relatively few are ready to join the client immediately, and without hesitations. This is different from what prior research has suggested; O'Riain (2000) showed that IT professionals often prefer taking jobs with clients than following the path to partnership in the specialized consultancies that employed them. We note, in contrast, the hesitation and ambivalence towards both of the dominant career paths. What may account for these findings is the particular point in the professionals' career that we capture. In contrast to earlier work that focused on early-career professionals (e.g., Anderson-Gough et al. 1998) or on people on the cups of promotion to partnership (Ibarra 1999), our study captures people's efforts at a medium point in their careers, after they already spent several years in the firm and experienced success in the promotion tournament, but years before they would be considered for partnership. Thus, we seem to capture a unique juncture point in the professionals' lives in which both organizational and broader career paths are perceived as equally legitimate.

Our results emphasizes the difficulty of living with the choice over one's career. They suggest that building internal career paths in PSFs are as much about figuring out how to "make it" internally as it is about understanding and accepting how one feels about the ever-present, "other" possibility of taking a job with clients. Thus, with regards to implications for careers research in PSFs, our findings suggest that how professionals relate to their clients is an intrinsic part of how they see their careers unfolding in the future. This is particularly relevant for understanding mid- and later-career mobility and advancement, as investigated in this study. We argue that the set of efforts taken by individual professionals towards managing their client contacts needs to be addressed as seriously as are the efforts to manage one's direct superiors and peers in the PSF.

Implications for Research on Role Enactment

Our findings may also help the renewed interest in scholarship on role theory. In particular, despite the growing body of research on role crafting - the efforts people make to define, negotiate and craft the behavioral expectations attached to one's organizational role –and the consequences of these efforts for how people experiences organizational life (e.g., Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001, Grant and Ashford 2008; Sluss, van Dick and Thompson 2010), so far there has been little elaboration of the ways in which expectation enactment happens in organizational contexts with multiple role expectations and different possible mobility paths – the kind of situations more and more common in contemporary organizations. We believe that our findings have a couple of specific contributions to make in this direction.

For example, although role expectation theorists have always argued that the focal person is not a passive recipient but also modifies the role and the expectations of the role-set by the manner of role enactment (Graen 1976), the common underlying assumption in the literature is that role-making occurs mainly during the early weeks of role occupancy (or, if in later stages, that it occurs in more automatic ways). In our setting, however, we find that role making occurs continuously – especially for those professionals who see themselves as staying for the longer run (the "on-track" group) – and also that role making is rarely automatic, but rather intentional and frequent. We also find that role making is strongly future-oriented. Strongly agentic forms of role expectation enactment, such as acting on the role set and signaling successful enactment, make sense only if role taking is seen by organizational members as a long-term situation, where multiple opportunities for adjustment of expectations are possible, in the short- or at least the medium run (e.g., next set of projects, next year). Finally, we observe here how the dynamic between role set members and focal actor in the present can reinforce or overturn the dynamic established over time, in a much more time-dependent fashion than usually theorized in the role theory literature.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of our study is the relative lack of emphasis on the differences in the ways in which professionals enact their role and the conditions they see as important in structuring those practices, as driven by their belonging to different professional sector. Indeed, our results suggest that these differences may exist, as for example, lawyers in our sample appear disproportionally more in the wait-and-see group and less in the on-track or client-track group than accountants or consultants. This could be because lawyers' progression through the internal career path ramps up more gradually towards partnership, such as only very senior pre-partnership professionals get to experience their role in ways that more closely resemble a partner's role, whereas with consultants and accountants, that anticipatory role enactment may start happening quite early after the promotion to manager. Nevertheless, what strengthens our confidence is that the categories of practices and the conditions we surfaced in this study seem to hold across the professions, even if to varying degrees. Future research should investigate directly which role enactment practices are more or less prevalent in the different professions and how this relates to the internal career progression paths characteristic for the profession.

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